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ABSTRACT

Studies on victimization suggest that victims, whether of crime, accident, disease, or natural disaster, ask "why me?" questions and that finding answers to these questions seems related to the victims' adjustment. An attributional theory of victims' search for meaning in their misfortune proposes that victims perceive their misfortunes as personally caused events and suggests that beliefs about cosmology play a critical role in adjustment. The cognitive aspects of the process of adjustment to victimization is a general process regardless of the misfortune suffered. The victim's perception of the misfortune invokes the paradigm of personal causation whether it is rationally appropriate or not. Counselors and pscyhotherapists must recognize and facilitate this process in order to promote the victim's adjustment. Therapists must accept preoccupations with "why" questions and animistic accounts for natural events as the expected reactions to victimization and as a normal part of the adjustment process. The timing and choice of intervention with victims require greater understanding of the role of fatalistic accounts, and of when such accounts become counterproductive to a victim's recovery. It has yet to be resolved which treatment approach is most effective for victims. Cognitive treatment orientations are relevant, metaphysical or religious beliefs may be valuable for some clients, and certain forms of existentialism may benefit others. (NRB)

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"Why Me?" An Attributional Theory of Adjustment to Victimization

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Abstract

Empirical studies of victims suggest that adjustment to being a victim involves asking and answering the question "Why did this happen to me?" This paper presents an attributional theory of victims' search for meaning in their misfortune. The theory argues that victims perceive their misfortunes as personally caused events--even when they are victims of "natural events," and suggests that personal or institutionalized beliefs about cosmology plays a critical role in adjustment. Implications for psychologists' interventions with victimized clients are discussed.

The Journal of Social Issues devoted a recent issue to the phenomenon of victimization. As the issue attests, psychologists have begun to think of victims as a population with special needs as they adjust to the consequences of their victimization. At this time, however, it is unclear whether there is a general pattern to this adjustment process or if the course of adjustment is particular to the conditions under which one becomes a "victim." The ranks of people said to be "victimized" include targets of criminal action (e.g., robbery, rape, and incest), but also include victims of accident, disease, and natural disasters (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Wortman, 1983). Thus, if a general pattern to the course of adjustment to victimization is to be established, empirical investigations of particular forms of victimization must be subsumed under a theory capable of accounting for the common features of the adjustment process.

In this paper we are proposing an attributional theory of a salient feature of victim adjustment: asking and answering the question: "Why did this happen to me?" One prominent theme in current victimization literature is that victims spontaneously generate "why me?" questions during the recovery process and that finding answers to these questions seems to be related to making progress in adjustment (Bulman & Wortman, 1977). Apparently victims are searching for a sense of meaning in their misfortune that facilitates their being reconciled to that event and its consequences and that provides direction regarding their future life course. Seeking reasons or purposes for being victimized by other human beings may be seen as a simple case of normal social attribution (Gulotta & Neuberger, 1983); thus, rape victims looking for a reason for their being attacked are engaging in normal -- though, perhaps, misguided -- attribution. A comparable analysis by victims of accidents would seem to

represent a form of attributional error! Yet such attribution has been observed: Bulman and Wortman (1977) have reported that 28 of 29 paraplegic victims of "freak accidents" had spontaneously asked the question "why," and ultimately formulated answers of "reason" and "purpose" that were metaphysical in character. How can this be explained?

In two recent papers, Shaffer (1984a and 1984b) has provided an account of what he calls "animistic attribution" which can be extended into a theory of victimization. Briefly stated, the victim feels "targeted": Jones and Davis'(1965) categories of personalism and hedonic relevance apply directly to the case of the victim. But the effect of feeling targeted leads victims to make attributions using cognitive processes adapted to attributing personal causation even when these processes are not rationally appropriate. Drawing on Heider's (1958) distinction between personal and impersonal causality, Shaffer argues that the experience of being victimized leads individuals to see their misfortune as having the character of "equifinality." According to Heider, it is this perception that triggers the attribution process that searches for personal causation, but according to Shaffer, this process can, in the case of the victim, be applied to natural events. The result is a form of attribution error which Shaffer calls the "animistic attribution error." Figures 1 and 2 from Shaffer (1984) schematize this process. Figure 1 shows Heider's account of perceptual paradigms for personal and impersonal causality; in terms of Buss's (1978) distinction, the impersonal causality paradigm presses the perceiver to look for reasons. When the personal causality paradigm is superimposed on "natural events," perceivers are pressed toward satisfying their need for finding meaning with speculation about the will, intentions, or purposes of some metaphysical agent such as fate. It is this press toward understanding the "ultimate" reasons behind

natural events that led to the term "animistic attribution" as a description of this process.

The adjustment process of the victim, then, can be modeled as follows. The experience of victimization triggers the attribution process because victimization inherently involves personalism and hedonic relevance. The victim further perceives equifinality to the misfortune, and the result is a pressure to make an attribution of reason or purpose for the misfortune. The victim, however, is not looking for a cause: the crux of this model is that an explanation of the victim's misfortune is not central to the adjustment process. When the victim asks "why did this happen to me," the only satisfactory answer is a reason, not a cause. Causal accounts of misfortune do not explain the "perceived equifinality" of the events. "This event," in the frequent words of the victim, "didn't just happen!" Therefore, the victim feels compelled to find a reason or purpose in their misfortune for that is what gives "meaning" to this crucial episode in their lives. Our account of this process is that it is not merely a search prompted by curiosity or need for closure; rather, the victim is seeking a satisfying answer -- one which reconciles the victim to misfortune by finding an acceptable reason for the event. The best resolution is one that suggests a positive role for the misfortune and its consequences in the victim's future life. Our theory suggests that this process is critical to the progress of adjustment.

Figure 3 is a schematic representation of our view of the attributional processes of the victim. Readers familiar with Jones and Davis' (1965) theory of correspondent inferences will be familiar with the perspective reflected in the column headings: attribution procedes backwards from perceived events and their mistakes toward the dispositions of the agents who instigated those events. The variables of personalism and hedonic relevance lead to the per-

ception of being "targeted" (Shaffer, 1984a): the victim's question "why me?" reflects the personalism of misfortune. The very nature of personal misfortune guarantees that the event will possess the feature of hedonic relevance. Taken together, the personalism and hedonic relevance trigger the attribution process -- and considerable affect as well! In a review of patients diagnosed as suffering stress response syndrome, Krupnick and Horowitz (1981) point out that victims (especially victims of war or natural disaster) verbalize themes of anger and frustration which include the need to find someone to blame for the misfortune and anger at fate: "Persons may blame fate for selecting them, rather than someone else, as the victim of misfortune . . . Krupnick and Horowitz, 1981, p. 429, emphasis added). It is the perception of personalism and hedonic relevance that trigger the attribution process, which is verbalized in the question "why me?"

But the attribution process, depicted in the center column of Figure 3, is not what the limits of rationality must dictate. Our major point is made here: the answer to the victim's "why me?" question is not satisfied with a causal account of the misfortune. A quadraplegic injured in a freak accident is not looking for a physicist's account of the sufficiency of physical forces to explain the extent of the injuries, or a physician's account of the sufficiency of the injuries to explain the permanent paralysis the victim has suffered. While the causal account may provide information the victim will incorporate into the attribution process, the personalism and hedonic relevance of the event will trigger the personal causality paradigm, and the victim will be pressed beyond the "facts" of the misfortune to the reality beyond. This represents Shaffer's (1984a) concept of the "animistic attribution error." The victim acts as if the event were caused by intentional human action, and therefore, is pressed to understanding the motives of some metaphysical agent

or agents. While such answers are not "scientific" or "rational," they are, in our model, natural and common.

The attribution process, according to our model, follows from the victim's perception of the equifinality of the misfortune: the event, in retrospect, seems to have been inevitable. If the person feels "picked out" for misfortune, then the event is perceived as if it were a goal. This leads to the imposition of the personal causality model, where differing circumstances are overcome by different choices of means in order that the goal of the agent is reached. As Shaffer (1984a) has pointed out, this fits the case of fatalistic accounts of life. Further, the retrospective inevitability of life events has been documented by Fischhoff and his colleagues (Fischhoff, 1975; Fischhoff and Beyth, 1975). In Fischhoff's research, knowledge of the "outcomes" of an event leads to what is called "hindsight bias" where perceivers' reconstruction of the probabilities of life events are biased by outcome knowledge to make events seem more inevitable than they seem to observers without such outcome knowledge. "Hindsight bias" contributes to the perception that there is a reason behind the causes for misfortune, and animistic attribution is the process that seeks to recover the meaning of such life events.

The left-hand column of Figure 3 is the end-product of the attribution process, and it is our contention that the end result is like a conventional "correspondent inference" (Jones and Davis, 1965). That is, the victim is searching for a reason for being singled out for misfortune. In that sense, the victim has perceived what Heider (1958) would have called "phenomenal causality" in his or her misfortune, and the victim is asking the animist's question about the intelligent agency that must be the undetected mover behind "natural events". The universe is personified to the victim who asks "why me?" and searches for a "purpose" to the misfortune that will reconcile the victim to his or her disrupted life history. If the victim is conventionally re-

ligious, there may be a belief-system in place to provide answers to supplement the attribution process. But we believe that the attribution process is neither limited to those who are religious, nor is it initiated by beliefs. Rather, we believe that this is a "natural" process of cognition which is generically applicable to all victims. Victims of crime may have some human being (the perpetrator) to make attributions about, although questions of more ultimate character are still asked by, for example, a rape victim. (Indeed, the past preoccupation with crime victims may have delayed psychologists recognizing the attributional process we have been describing.) But for victims of accident, disease, natural disaster, terrorism, or war, the question "why me?" is more clearly and directly aimed at the cosmos, and the process of adjustment to such misfortune seems to be related to the victim's ability to deal with that question in a satisfying way.

This paper makes an important suggestion: the cognitive aspects of the process of adjustment to victimization is a general process regardless of the particular kind of misfortune suffered. It accounts for this process with established perspectives on attribution with one important innovation: that the victim's perception of the misfortune will invariably invoke the paradigm of personal causation <u>whether it is rationally appropriate or not</u>. It therefore suggests that counseling or psychotherapy must recognize this process and seek to facilitate it in order to promote the victim's adjustment. But this theory also raises a number of issues as well.

The first issue has to do with the clinical assessment of attributions. We suspect that a clinician or counselor who makes the ordinary cosmological assumptions of materialism and secularism associated with modern culture in general and science in particular, may see preoccupation with "why" questions and "animistic" accounts of "natural" events as counterproductive or maladaptive. Our model suggests that these signs are the expected reactions to

victimization, and a normal part of the adjustment process.

The second issue raises the question of if and when fatalistic accounts become counterproductive to the victim's recovery. Little is known at this time about the circumstances in which fatalistic accounts facilitate getting on with life. Likewise, in what instances does the victim's arriving at the fatalistic assumption of having been "singled out" generalize to the prediction of a continuing life of fatalistically determined misfortune? Greater understanding of the issues just raised are critical to both the timing and choice of interventions with victims.

A third issue has to do with the choice of treatment when the victim's natural support systems -- individual an social -- have failed. While the cognitive treatment orientations of Beck (1976) and Ellis (1962) are obviously relevant, more critical are the belief systems comfortable to both client and counselor. Philosophies and religions offer accounts of human events that provide direct answers (or at least frameworks for answers) to "why" questions. For example, all major religions offer "theodicies" -- accounts of the problem of suffering (Berger, 1967). But clients with weak or nonexistent ties to a belief system may have difficulty with finding meaningful answers to their questions. This suggests that instruction (or reintroduction) of belief systems may be helpful to a client. On the other hand, some forms of existentialism would see the whole process of asking and answering such "why" questions as "bad faith" and would perhaps, prescribe some existential courage to face the absurdity of life! Given the range of schools of thought available to contemporary psychology, the counseling of victims suggests the need to examine the role of introducing or using the client's current metaphysical or religious beliefs. If these beliefs are "bad faith" , can a model of counseling victims in existential frameworks

be developed? If these beliefs are seen by professionals as beneficial, can clients be assisted in using their beliefs (or to learn new beliefs) to answer "why" questions? And finally, should victims be counseled by inter-disciplinary teams include specialists in belief systems and their employment (such as the clergy)?

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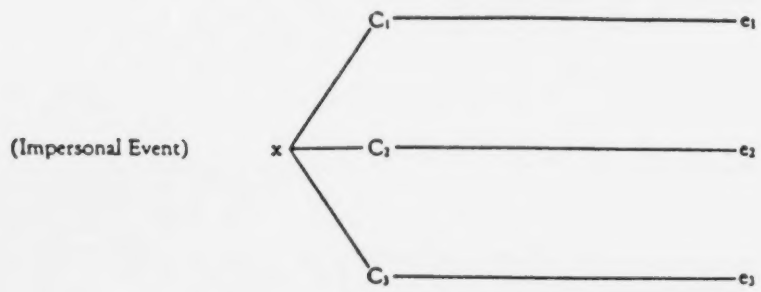
MODEL OF IMPERSONAL CAUSALITY (MULTIFINALITY)



MODEL OF PERSONAL CAUSALITY (EQUIFINALITY)

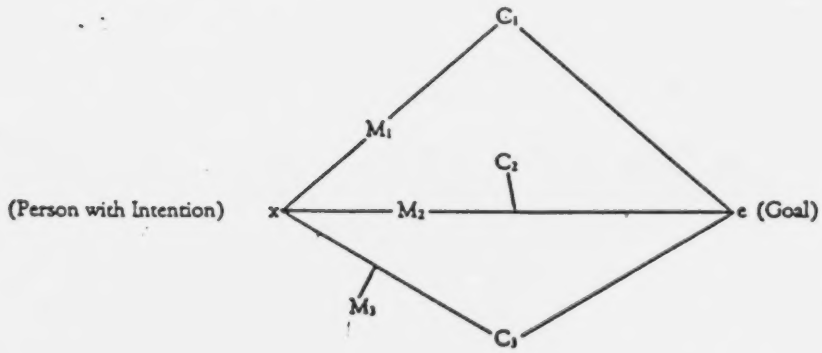
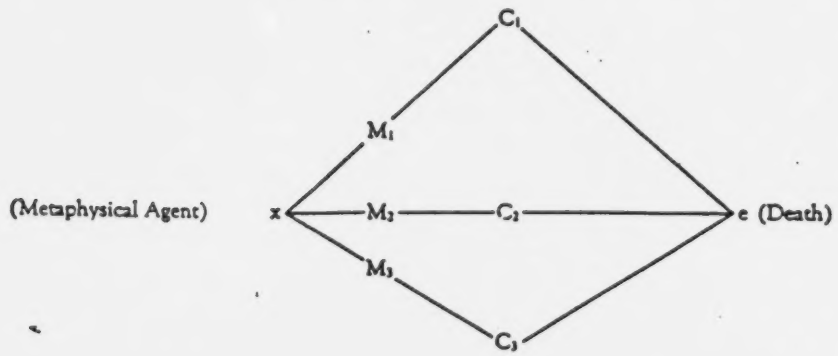


Figure 1: A comparison of Heider's models of personal and impersonal causation. (Based on *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* by F. Heider, pp. 107-108.)



M_1 = collision M_2 = derailment M_3 = terrorist bomb

C_1 = car C_2 = train C_3 = airplane

Figure 2: Example of Model of Personal Causality Applied to Fatalistic View of Death.

(Shaffer, 1984a; © Institute of Mind and Behavior, 1984)

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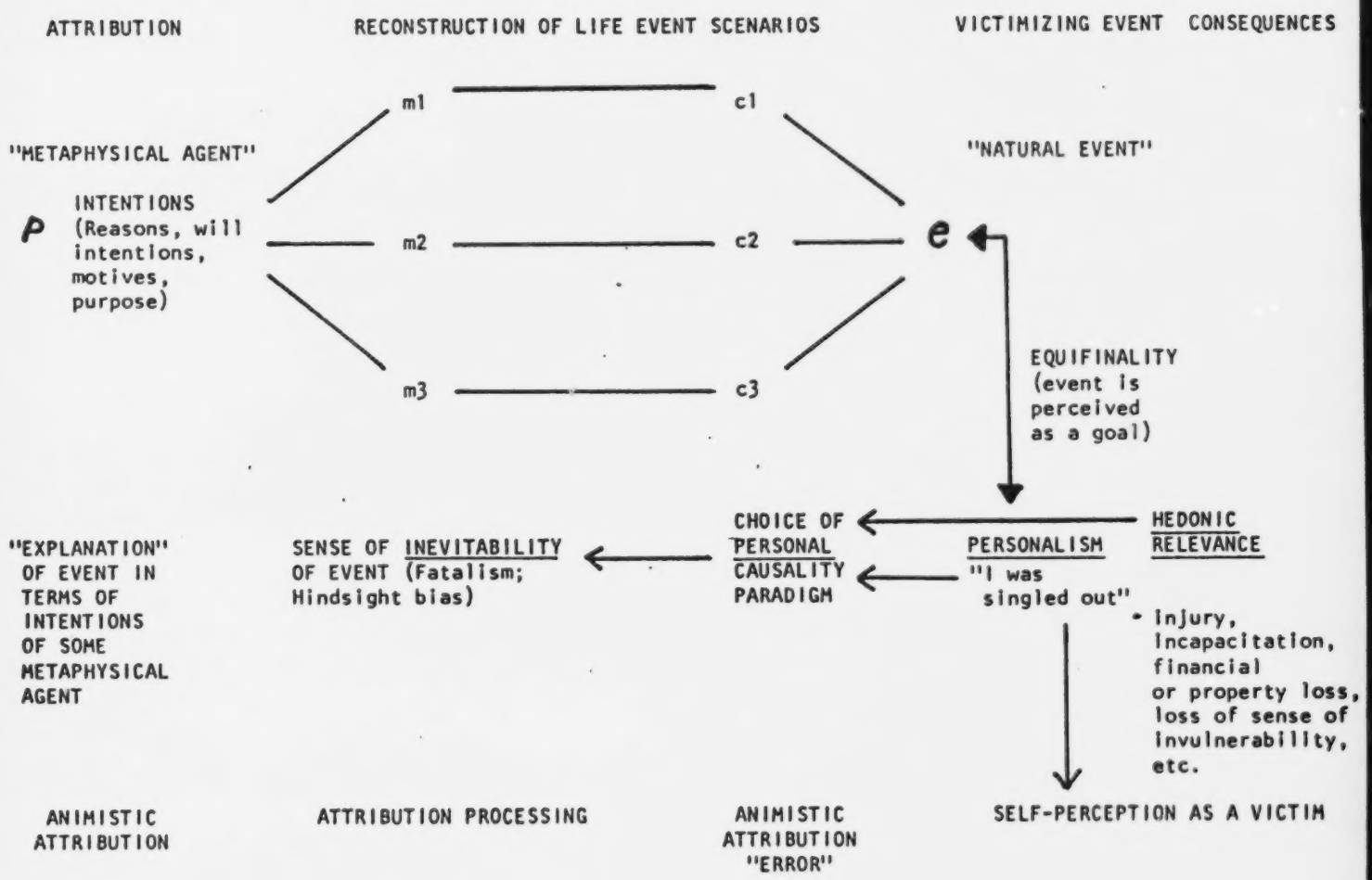

Figure 3: Schematic Representation of Victims' Attributional Processes.